

TEACHING ENGLISH AT THE SECONDARY LEVEL: A STUDY OF TEACHERS' PERCEIVED DIFFICULTIES IN IMPLEMENTING CLT IN BANGLADESH

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ABSTRACT

For the last thirty years, the field of TESOL (TEACHING ENGLISH AT THE SECONDARY LEVEL) has been influenced in its development by different issues which have led to increasing demands for an inquiry into the social, economical and political aspects of English language teaching. In the light of such demands, this empirical survey looks into English teachers' perceived difficulties in implementing Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, the impact of these difficulties on language teaching, on the learners from the Bangladeshi ELT context. Qualitative results show that teachers perceive these difficulties in different ways, but there are noticeable patterns which suggest that these difficulties, to a great extent, make CLT ineffective for teaching English at the secondary level in Bangladesh.

KEYWORDS: *Communicative Language Teaching & TESOL*

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INTRODUCTION

The study presents analysis of English language teachers' perceptions regarding the difficulties they face in practicing CLT principles in the Bangladeshi context. With the innovation of CLT in the early 1970s, there is tremendous change in classroom activities. To make students communicatively competent and with a view to engaging students in real life like situation, different types of interesting classroom activities were developed. Authentic language use and classroom exchanges where students engage in real communication with one another became quite popular.

Despite the worldwide popularity of CLT in ESL/EFL curriculum and textbooks, research suggests (e.g. Andreson, 1993; Christ & Makarani, 2009; Sze 1992; Ye, 2007 as cited in Al-Mahlafi & Ramani, 2011) that CLT principles in classroom are rarely used and these principles are only confined in syllabus design, lesson structure and content.

Karavas & Doukas (1996, P. 187) in their study on using attitude scales to instigate a teachers' attitude to the communicative approach found that while most teachers profess to be following communicative approach, in the practice they are following more traditional approach. Broadly speaking, the communicative approach appears to have brought more innovation on the level of theory than on the level of teachers' actual classroom practice.

The present investigation aims to show how Bangladeshi English teachers working at secondary level institutions perceive the challenges and difficulties in implementing CLT principles in teaching English in contrary with the increasing demand of communicative for teaching English all over the world.

Communicative language teaching approach was first introduced in Bangladesh in 1996. After that students are taught communicatively using Communicative Language Teaching methodology. It was supposed that CLT would develop learners' communicative competence and thereby strengthen the human resource development of the Government in Bangladesh (NCTB, 2003 cited in Hamid & Baldouf, 2003). The communicative approach was also set correlative intervention since, despite years of schooling, "our students are very weak in English and as a result, they can't apply English in their practical life successfully." (NCTB, 2003, P. 3 cited in Hamid & Baldouf, 2003)

Almost Twelve years have passed since CLT was first introduced in the national curriculum. But still often CLT is criticized by educators and linguist in our country regarding its appropriateness and effectively. So, the question comes, "Is it really possible to apply CLT for the improvement of English language teaching in Bangladesh?"

As regards the applicability of CLT principle in Bangladesh, Borman, Sultan & Basu (2007) cited in Islam & Bari (2012) identified eight factors as constraints in implementing CLT in Bangladesh: (1) inefficiency of ELT practitioners, (2) economic constraint, (3) administrative set-up, (4) infrastructure limitation, (5) cultural conflict, (6) seating arrangement in classrooms, (7) class size and (8) testing. They state that the English instructors in Bangladesh lack proper training and they do not fully understand the concept of CLT. They also added that an insignificant number of institutions are preoccupied with result oriented teaching which only focuses on reading and writing. The classes in many cases are too large to manage, sometimes the number may rise to around 200.

In a study of Islam & Bari (2012) on the implementation of CLT in Bangladesh, it is found that teachers fail to motivate students to develop communicative competence as most of the students concentrate on syllabus and passing or getting good marks in exams.

LITERATURE REVIEW

For more than three decades, much emphasis has been put on teaching English language using a communicative approach. In the early 1970s communicative approach emerged as a reaction against the rigid Grammar-Translation method and Audio lingual method with a view to developing learners' communicative competence in a foreign or second language.

Communicative competence was a term coined by Dell Hymes (1972), to refer to our ability to use social and functional aspects of a language for meaningful communication. Here the main emphasis is not only on the production of grammatically correct sentences but also on the knowledge of where, when and to whom to use these sentences in a communicative event (Richards & Rogers 2003)

The notion of communicative competence is further enveloped by Canale & Swain (1980). They divide the communicative competence into four basic components; grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. The mastery of all these our components will enable learners to the extent that they can use the target language with native like proficiency.

In addition to these views, Wilkins (1972) defines communicative as the ability to understand and express owes ideas. Instead of gaining mastery on linguistics items, CLT approach is more concerned with the active participation of learners, their interest and belief and the necessity of linguistics discussion and vocabulary (Richards & Rogers, 2003).

In communicative Language Teaching approach, language teaching makes use of real life situations; the situation

that we face in our daily life. In this way learners can get the chance to have a great exposure in the target language. Teachers in the CLT classrooms act a facilitator or monitors of the learners' progression in language learning (Larsen-Freeman, 1986). Learners are the active participants in all kinds of classroom activities and the classrooms are far from quiet.

As the students are performing the tasks themselves, they will gain confident in using target language in real life later on. Thus a CLT classroom will ensure that all the four language skills of each student are developing.

Although most literature on CLT reflects a favorable attitude towards it, there are some opposite ideas regarding the effectiveness and appropriateness of CLT approach especially in EFL/ESL context. In impending CLT in Asian context, Ellis (1996) as cited in Islam and Bari (2012), argues the CLT does not response well in Asian education condition. There is always a difference between western culture and eastern culture. Therefore to use CLT in Asian context, the teachers in these countries always need to accommodate it with their own cultural setting.

The Present Study, Its Participants and Methodology

The data for the present study were collected my means of a questionnaire survey and focus group interview among practicing English teachers at four different high schools. All the schools are private. The selection of these secondary level schools was guided by convenience. I personally know some of them who introduced me to other colleague. For the filing of questionnaires I myself went to a school where I got three teachers, and fill it instantly. I also have taken a focus group interview of these three teachers. For others, I sent my questionnaire to them by mail and the interview questions were added their as open ended questionnaires. They sent me their responses through mail.

Al the participant teachers had at least an MA in English literature or ELT. Some of them have also attended seminars and training focusing on CLT approach. The range of their teaching experience is 2-7 years.

The questionnaires (see the appendix) focused on a wide range of issues related to the English language teachers' perception on the difficulties they face in implementing CLT principles in the classrooms, the negative effect on the learners cause by these difficulties and the way of overcoming them. Some of the questions were open-ended, but most of them were guided questions. I can be able to collect data from only six teachers because of the shortage of time and other constraints.

DATA ANAYSIS AND FINDINGS

I analyzed the data by doing a content analysis. I throughout read the participants' replies to any particular question and summarized the views. I divided the summaries of the participants' responses into as many categories as possible. To maintain the validity and reliability of the responses I collected the same data from many dimensions. I will now present these findings for each of the questions.

Why Choose CLT Principles in Classrooms?

Among the six teachers five use ELT principles in their classrooms and one did not tried it because of the large class size. Among the five two teachers use it in the classroom because the books are designed on CLT methodology. All the five teachers are interested in using CLT in the classroom because they found it innovative and creative.

Students' Motivation to Develop Communicative Competence

Though the teachers are interested in implementing CLT in language classroom, the face problem because students are less motivated to take part in classroom activities. All the teachers strongly agree on the ground that students lack motivation to develop their communicative competence. They found that students are more interested in memorizing the thing that will come in the exam. They claimed that when they want to practice such activities as role play, information-gap, jigsaw the students are less motivated because they know that these tasks hardly help them to prepare for the exam.

Fault in the Testing System

In a focus group interview, three of the teachers showed a strong dissatisfaction regarding the exam system. They criticized it because the exam is not provided for the testing of all language skills. In our exam system, there are only two skills; writing and reading to be tested, and other two skills; speaking and listening have been ignored. The teachers have earlier stated that students like to participate in those activities that they find important for the exam. As regards listening and speaking, two major skills to communicate have not been included in our testing system, the students feel less motivated to develop them. However the teachers also tell that there is possibility of corruption if these two skills (listening and speaking) are included in the exam system. Moreover, the teachers also found that the testing of reading and writing is far from appropriateness. Students are given such reading task that they have read earlier. The teachers claimed that with such "seen" passages we can never be able to judge the actual reading ability of the students. As regards the writing test, the teachers found that in every year some common paragraphs or essays come repeatedly which attract the students for memorization and demotivate them to do something creative in the classroom.

Low Proficiency of the Students in the Target Language

Another difficulty pointed out by the teachers is the low proficiency of the students in English. All the teachers strongly or simply agree to this point. They pointed out that they enter in secondary level do not have the proper command in English required for engaging CLT activities. They said there is a lack of qualified English teachers at primary school. And for this reason the base of the students does not build in a proper way. The students need to be learn more language command before entering the high schools.

Shortage of Time and Number of Classes

The teachers claim that they do not get enough time for the development of materials, for completion of the syllabus. The time allotted for each class is not sufficient.

Few Opportunities for CLT Training

All the teachers strongly agreed on the point that they have less opportunity for CLT training. There is less awareness regarding the principles of CLT among teachers.

Large Class

In a focus group interview teachers told that when they give a group work, only few students take part in it and most of them remain silent. As regards the monitoring them argued that the classes are too large to monitor. In case of role play, they found that it became much more difficult to engage all the students because the number of the students sometimes exceeds more than 100.

The Deference of Our Culture from the Western

The teachers perceived the difference of our culture from the western. They agreed on the point that teachers do not have the sufficient knowledge of the target language culture. Thus, they sometimes fail to understand the meaning of some utterance or words in specific context.

DISCUSSIONS

The teachers claim that the students lack proper motivation to improve their communicative competence. They are more concerned with what is important for the exam and how can we get good grades. This finding matches with the research work done by Islam and Bari (2012) where they found the same result.

There is also great dissatisfaction of the teachers regarding testing system. They argued that this testing system does not include listening and speaking test, therefore the students lack motivation to engage in such real life conversation that will make them prepare to fulfill their communicative need. This view of the teachers can be comparable with Barman, Sultana & Basu (2012) who identified testing system as one of the major constraints in implementing CLT in Bangladesh. As regards testing the teacher pointed out that this testing system does not measure the actual language ability of the students. This view of the teachers match with a Study carried by Hamid & Baldouf (2003) on the effectiveness of CLT in Bangladesh reveals a mismatch between the S.S.C test scores and the actual ability of the students.

As regards the large class, the teachers are divided in their opinion. Two of the teachers do not consider large classes as an impediment to apply CLT in Bangladesh. But the other four teachers found a large class as a big problem. Probably the two teachers never experience the teaching in a large class. That is why it does not seem as a problem to him. Otherwise in a study carried out by Barman, Sultana & Basu (2012) it is found that large class is one of the fundamental problem in implementing CLT.

Pedagogical Implication

From the findings, we may have, to some extent, a picture of the problems in implementing CLT in our country. Though this type of small study cannot claim to make concrete recommendations for the proper application of CLT in our country, some suggestions may be found:

- The English language testing system can be changed. In the exam, the students should not be given such items which they have memorized earlier. At the same time, there is a need for the inclusion of speaking and listening test certainly with ensuring the honesty of the teachers in marking them.
- Teachers can motivate the students to participate in different CLT activities. The teacher need make everything interesting in their classes. In the syllabus, there can be more stories, nobles, drama so that the students feel interested in dealing with English language.
- To build up a strong base in English, there is a need of qualified teachers at primary level who will make them speak, listen, write an read in English from their early age.
- After getting admitted at secondary level, secondary schools can offer English foundation courses to lift them up to the level of accommodating with CLT.
- Large classes can be broken into two or more small classes. For this purpose, the number of English teachers

needs to be increased.

- There is also need for teachers' training on CLT. These trainings may occur at several times in a year to make the teacher known with the upgrading knowledge of CLT.

CONCLUSIONS

Admittedly, the case study involved a small sample, and therefore the findings should be interpreted cautiously. This study has not been carried out for building up any theory. Rather, it provides some qualitative results and some emerging patterns on how Bangladeshi English perceived the problems in their teaching of English and their insights in how to overcome them.

Finally, it is expected that the qualitative results and insights gained from the survey, to some extent, will make the ELT practitioners aware of the present status of CLT as a teaching methodology in Bangladesh.

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